

U.S. Sanctions Russians With Financial Ties to Syrian Regime

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Kirsan Ilyumzhinov

The U.S. Treasury Department on Wednesday announced sanctions against a Russian businessman who heads the World Chess Federation, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, accusing him of assisting Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Other targets of the latest sanctions, brought against a total of four individuals and six entities, include a dual Syrian and Russian citizen, George Haswani, accused of serving “as a middleman for oil purchases by the Syrian regime from ISIL [Islamic State].” Sanctions also target Russian Financial Alliance Bank, co-owned by Ilyumzhinov, and Mudalal Khuri, the Treasury Department said in an online statement.

The measures are part of U.S. attempts to put financial pressure on Assad, whom Washington wants to step down, and to cut off the financial flow to Islamic State.

“The Syrian government is responsible for widespread brutality and violence against its own people,” said Adam Szubin, acting Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, said in a statement. “The United States will continue targeting the finances of all those enabling Assad to continue inflicting violence on the Syrian people.”

Ilyumzhinov, a former president of the Russian region of Kalmykia, is accused of “materially assisting” the Syrian government and Syria's Central Bank, the Treasury Department's statement said.

“An advisor to Ilyumzhinov, then-president of Kalmykia, was convicted in Russia in 1999 for the murder of an opposition journalist who reportedly was investigating an offshore business registration mechanism in Kalmykia tied to Ilyumzhinov,” the statement added. “Russian authorities subsequently closed the offshore business registration mechanism after concluding that it was being used for illegal purposes.”

The businessman denied any financial dealings with Syria, and said he would try to “sort out” the issue of sanctions next week, when he plans to visit New York to discuss preparations for next year's world chess championship, Russia's Interfax news agency reported.

“I want to emphasize that I did not have, and do not have, any commercial interests in either Syria or Iran,” Ilyumzhinov was quoted by Interfax as saying.

The Russian government openly supports Assad, arguing that he is the legitimate ruler of Syria. Russia has conducted an air strike campaign in Syria since Sept. 30, maintaining that the operation is aimed against Islamic State.

But the United States accuses Russia of using the air campaign to prop up the Assad regime by bombing forces that oppose him, and urges Russia to direct its military campaign against Islamic State, rather than against other anti-government insurgents.

The issue turned acute this week, when another NATO member country, Turkey, shot down a Russian warplane Tuesday, saying the jet had violated its airspace.

The downing came after Ankara had urged Russia to stop bombing Syria's Turkmen tribesmen, who are of Turkish descent and who are fighting against Assad, and to focus on the fight against terror.

Islamic State is a terrorist organization banned in Russia.

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